The Author's Commentaries on the Occasion of the Thirtieth Year of Publication of

The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge

The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge was first published in 1968. On the occasion of its thirtieth year of publication, I would like to make a few clarifications about the work itself, and to state some general conclusions about the subject of the book at which I have arrived, after years of serious and consistent effort. The book came as a result of anthropological field work which I did in the state of Arizona and in the state of Sonora, Mexico. While doing graduate work in the Anthropology Department at the University of California at Los Angeles, I happened to meet an old shaman, a Yaqui Indian from the state of Sonora, Mexico. His name was Juan Matus.

I consulted with various professors of the Anthropology Department about the possibility of doing anthropological field work, using the old shaman as a key informant. Every one of those professors tried to dissuade me, on the basis of their conviction that before thinking about doing field work, I had to give priority to the required load of academic subjects, in general, and to the formalities of graduate work, such as written and oral examinations. The professors were absolutely right. It didn't take any persuasion on their part for me to see the logic of their advice.

There was, however, one professor, Dr. Clement Meighan, who openly spurred my interest in doing field work. He is the person to whom I must give full credit for inspiring me to carry out anthropological research. He was the only one who urged me to immerse myself as deeply as I could into the possibility that had opened up for me. His urging was based on his personal field experiences as an archaeologist. He told me that he had found out, through his work, that time was of the essence, and that there was very little of it left before enormous and complex areas of knowledge attained by cultures in decline would be lost forever under the impact of modern technology and philosophical drives. He put to me as an example the work of some established anthropologists of the turn of the century, and the early part of the twentieth century, who collected ethnographic data as hurriedly but as methodically as possible on the cultures of the American Indians of the plains, or of California. Their haste was justified, because in a matter of one generation, the sources of information about most of those native cultures were obliterated, especially among the Indian cultures of California.

At the same time all this was happening, I had the good fortune of attending classes with Professor Harold Garfinkel of the Sociology Department at UCLA. He supplied me with the most extraordinary ethnomethodological paradigm, in which the practical actions of everyday life were a bona fide subject for philosophical discourse; and any phenomenon being researched had to be examined in its own light and according to its own regulations and consistencies. If there were any laws or rules to be exacted, those laws and rules would have to be proper to the phenomenon itself. Therefore, the practical actions of shamans, viewed as a coherent system with its own regulations and configurations, were a solid subject for serious inquiry. Such an inquiry didn't have to be subject to theories built a priori, or to comparisons with material obtained under the auspices of a different philosophical rationale.

Under the influence of these two professors, I became deeply involved in my field work. My two driving forces, drawn from my contact with those two men, were: that there was very little time left for the thought processes of the Native American cultures to remain standing before everything was going to be obliterated into the mishmash of modern technology; and that the phenomenon under observation, whatever it may have been, was a bona fide subject for inquiry, and deserved my utmost care and seriousness.

I dove into my field work so deeply that I am sure that in the end, I disappointed the very people who were sponsoring me. I ended up in a field that was no man's land. It was not the subject of anthropology or sociology, or philosophy, or religion, for that matter. I had followed the phenomena's own regulations and configurations, but I didn't have the ability to emerge at a safe place. Therefore, I compromised my total effort by falling off the adequate academic scales for measuring its worth or its lack of it.

The irreducible description of what I did in the field would be to say that the Yaqui Indian sorcerer, don Juan Matus, introduced me into the *cognition* of the shamans of ancient Mexico. By *cognition*, it is meant the processes responsible for the awareness of everyday life, processes which include memory, experience, perception, and the expert use of any given syntax. The idea of *cognition* was, at that time, my most powerful stumbling block. It was inconceivable for me, as an educated Western man, that *cognition*, as it is defined in the philosophical discourse of our day, could be anything besides a homogeneous, all-engulfing affair for the totality of mankind. Western man is willing to consider cultural differences that would account for quaint ways of describing phenomena, but cultural differences could not possibly account for processes of memory, experience, perception, and the expert use of language to be anything other than the processes known to us. In other words, for Western man, there is only *cognition* as a group of general processes.

For the sorcerers of don Juan's lineage, however, there is the *cognition* of modern man, and there is the *cognition* of the shamans of ancient Mexico. Don Juan considered these two to be entire worlds of everyday life which were intrinsically different from one another. At a given moment, unbeknownst to me, my task mysteriously shifted from the mere gathering of anthropological data to the internalization of the new cognitive processes of the shamans' world.

A genuine internalization of such rationales entails a transformation, a different response to the world of everyday life. Shamans found out that the initial thrust of this transformation always occurs as an intellectual allegiance to something that appears to be merely a concept, but which has unsuspectedly powerful undercurrents. This was best described by don Juan when he said, "The world of everyday life cannot ever be taken as something personal that has power over us, something that could make us, or destroy us, because man's battlefield is not in his strife with the world around him. His battlefield is over the horizon, in an area which is unthinkable for an average man, the area where *man ceases to be a man*."

He explained those statements, saying that it was energetically imperative for human beings to realize that the only thing that matters is their encounter with *infinity*. Don Juan could not reduce the term *infinity* to a more manageable description. He said that it was energetically irreducible. It was something that could not be personified or even alluded to, except in such vague terms as *infinity*, '*lo infinito*.'

Little did I know at that time that don Juan was not giving me just an appealing intellectual description; he was describing something he called an *energetic fact*. *Energetic facts*, for him, were the conclusions that he and the other shamans of his lineage arrived at when they engaged in a function which they called *seeing*: the act of perceiving energy directly as it flows in the universe. The capacity to perceive energy in this manner is one of the culminating points of shamanism.

According to don Juan Matus, the task of ushering me into the *cognition* of the shamans of ancient Mexico was carried out in a traditional way, meaning that whatever he did to me was what was done to every shaman initiate throughout the ages. The internalization of the processes of a different *cognitive system* always began by drawing the shaman initiates' total attention to the realization that we are beings on our way to dying. Don Juan and the other shamans of his lineage believed that the full realization of this *energetic fact*, this irreducible truth, would lead to the acceptance of the new *cognition*.

The end result which shamans like don Juan Matus sought for their disciples was a realization which, by its simplicity, is so difficult to attain: that we are indeed beings that are going to die. Therefore, the real struggle of man is not the strife with his fellowmen, but with *infinity*, and this is not even a struggle; it is, in essence, an acquiescence. We must voluntarily acquiesce to *infinity*. In the description of sorcerers, our lives originate in *infinity*, and they end up wherever they originated: *infinity*.

Most of the processes which I have described in my published work had to do with the natural give and take of my persona as a socialized being under the impact of new rationales. In my field situation, what was taking place was something more urgent than a mere invitation to internalize the processes of that new *shamanistic cognition*; it was a demand. After years of struggle to maintain the boundaries of my persona intact, those boundaries gave in. Struggling to keep them was a meaningless act if it is seen in the light of what don Juan and the shamans of his lineage wanted to do. It was, however, a very important act in light of my need, which was the need of every civilized person: to maintain the boundaries of the known world.

Don Juan said that the *energetic fact* which was the cornerstone of the *cognition* of the shamans of ancient Mexico was that every nuance of the cosmos is an expression of energy. From their plateau of *seeing* energy directly, those shamans arrived at the *energetic fact* that the entire cosmos is composed of twin forces which are opposite and complementary to each other at the same time. They called those two forces *animate energy* and *inanimate energy*.

They*saw* that *inanimate energy* has no awareness. Awareness, for shamans, is a vibratory condition of *animate energy*. Don Juan said that the shamans of ancient Mexico were the first ones to *see* that all the organisms on Earth are the possessors of vibratory energy. They called them *organic beings*, and *saw* that it is the organism itself which sets up the cohesiveness and the limits of such energy. They also *saw* that there are conglomerates of vibratory, *animate energy* which have a cohesion of their own, free from the bindings of an organism. They called them *inorganic beings*, and described them as clumps of cohesive energy that is invisible to the human eye, energy that is aware of itself, and possesses a unity determined by an agglutinating force other than the agglutinating force of an organism.

The shamans of don Juan's lineage *saw* that the essential condition of animate energy, organic or inorganic, is to turn energy in the universe at large into sensory data. In the case of *organic beings*, this sensory data is then turned into a system of interpretation in which energy at large is classified and a given response is allotted to each classification, whatever the classification may be. The assertion of sorcerers is that in the realm of *inorganic beings*, the sensory data into which energy at large is transformed by the *inorganic beings*, must be, by definition, interpreted by them in whatever incomprehensible form they may do it.

According to the shamans' logic, in the case of human beings, the system of interpreting sensorial data is their *cognition*. They maintain that human *cognition* can be temporarily interrupted, since it is merely a taxonomical system, in which responses have been classified along with the interpretation of sensory data. When this interruption occurs, sorcerers claim that energy can be perceived directly as it flows in the universe. Sorcerers describe perceiving energy directly as having the effect of seeing it with the eyes, although the eyes are only minimally involved.

To perceive energy directly allowed the sorcerers of don Juan's lineage to *see* human beings as conglomerates of energy fields that have the appearance of luminous balls. Observing human beings in such a fashion allowed those shamans to draw extraordinary energetic conclusions. They noticed that each of those luminous balls is individually connected to an energetic mass of inconceivable proportions that exists in the universe; a mass which they called *the dark sea of awareness*. They observed that each individual ball is attached to the *dark sea of awareness* at a point that is even more brilliant than the luminous ball itself. Those shamans called that point of

juncture the *assemblage point*, because they observed that it is at that spot that perception takes place. The flux of energy at large is turned, on that point, into sensorial data, and those data are then interpreted as the world that surrounds us.

When I asked don Juan to explain to me how this process of turning the flux of energy into sensory data occurred, he replied that the only thing shamans know about this is that the immense mass of energy called *the dark sea of awareness* supplies human beings with whatever is necessary to elicit this transformation of energy into sensory data, and that such a process could not possibly ever be deciphered because of the vastness of that original source.

What the shamans of ancient Mexico found out when they focused their *seeing* on the *dark sea of awareness* was the revelation that the entire cosmos is made of luminous filaments that extend themselves infinitely. Shamans describe them as luminous filaments that go every which way without ever touching one another. They *saw* that they are individual filaments, and yet, they are grouped in inconceivably enormous masses.

Another of such masses of filaments, besides the *dark sea of awareness* which the shamans observed and liked because of its vibration, was something they called *intent*, and the act of individual shamans focusing their attention on such a mass, they called *intending*. They *saw* that the entire universe was a universe of *intent*, and *intent*, for them, was the equivalent of intelligence. The universe, therefore, was, for them, a universe of supreme intelligence. Their conclusion, which became part of their *cognitive world*, was that vibratory energy, aware of itself, was intelligent in the extreme. They saw that the mass of *intent* in the cosmos was responsible for all the possible mutations, all the possible variations which happened in the universe, not because of arbitrary, blind circumstances, but because of the *intending* done by the vibratory energy, at the level of the flux of energy itself.

Don Juan pointed out that in the world of everyday life, human beings make use of *intent* and *intending* in the manner in which they interpret the world. Don Juan, for instance, alerted me to the fact that my daily world was not ruled by my perception, but by the interpretation of my perception. He gave as an example the concept of *university*, which at that time was a concept of supreme importance to me. He said that *university* was not something I could perceive with my senses, because neither my sight nor my hearing, nor my sense of taste, nor my tactile or olfactory senses, gave me any clue about *university*. *University* happened only in my *intending*, and in order to construct it there, I had to make use of everything I knew as a civilized person, in a conscious or subliminal way.

The*energetic fact* of the universe being composed of luminous filaments gave rise to the shamans' conclusion that each of those filaments that extend themselves infinitely is a field of energy. They observed that luminous filaments, or rather fields of energy of such a nature converge on and go through the *assemblage point*. Since the size of the *assemblage point* was determined to be equivalent to that of a modern tennis ball, only a finite number of energy fields, numbering, nevertheless, in the zillions, converge on and go through that spot.

When the sorcerers of ancient Mexico *saw* the *assemblage point*, they discovered the *energetic fact* that the impact of the energy fields going through the *assemblage point* was transformed into sensory data; data which were then interpreted into the *cognition* of the world of everyday life. Those shamans accounted for the homogeneity of *cognition* among human beings by the fact that the *assemblage point* for the entire human race is located at the same place on the energetic luminous spheres that we are: at the height of the shoulder blades, an arm's length behind them, against the boundary of the luminous ball.

Their*seeing*-observations of the *assemblage point* led the sorcerers of ancient Mexico to discover that the *assemblage point* shifted position under conditions of normal sleep, or extreme fatigue, or

disease, or the ingestion of psychotropic plants. Those sorcerers *saw* that when the *assemblage point* was at a new position, a different bundle of energy fields went through it, forcing the *assemblage point* to turn those energy fields into sensory data, and interpret them, giving as a result a veritable new world to perceive. Those shamans maintained that each new world that comes about in such a fashion is an all-inclusive world, different from the world of everyday life, but utterly similar to it in the fact that one could live and die in it.

For shamans like don Juan Matus, the most important exercise of *intending* entails the volitional movement of the *assemblage point* to reach predetermined spots in the total conglomerate of fields of energy that make up a human being, meaning that through thousands of years of probing, the sorcerers of don Juan's lineage found out that there are key positions within the total luminous ball that a human being is where the *assemblage point* can be located and where the resulting bombardment of energy fields on it can produce a totally veritable new world. Don Juan assured me that it was an *energetic fact* that the possibility of journeying to any of those worlds, or to all of them, is the heritage of every human being. He said that those worlds were there for the asking, as questions are sometimes begging to be asked, and that all that a sorcerer or a human being needed to reach them was to *intend* the movement of the *assemblage point*.

Another issue related to *intent*, but transposed to the level of universal *intending*, was, for the shamans of ancient Mexico the *energetic fact* that we are continually pushed and pulled and tested by the universe itself. It was for them an *energetic fact* that the universe in general is predatorial to the maximum, but not predatorial in the sense in which we understand the term: the act of plundering or stealing, or injuring or exploiting others for one's own gain. For the shamans of ancient Mexico, the predatory condition of the universe meant that the *intending* of the universe is to be continually testing awareness. They *saw* that the universe creates zillions of *organic beings* and zillions of *inorganic beings*. By exerting pressure on all of them, the universe forces them to enhance their awareness, and in this fashion, the universe attempts to become aware of itself. In the *cognitive world* of shamans, therefore, awareness is the final issue.

Don Juan Matus and the shamans of his lineage regarded *awareness* as the act of being deliberately conscious of all the perceptual possibilities of man, not merely the perceptual possibilities dictated by any given culture whose role seems to be that of restricting the perceptual capacity of its members. Don Juan maintained that to release, or set free, the total perceiving capacity of human beings would not in any way interfere with their functional behavior. In fact, functional behavior would become an extraordinary issue, for it would acquire a new value. Function in these circumstances becomes a most demanding necessity. Free from idealities and pseudo-goals, man has only function as his guiding force. Shamans call this*impeccability*. For them, to be impeccable means to do one's utmost best, and a bit more. They derived function from *seeing* energy directly as it flows in the universe. If energy flows in a certain way, to follow the flow of energy is, for them, being functional. Function is, therefore, the common denominator by means of which shamans face the *energetic facts* of their *cognitive world*.

The exercise of all the units of the *sorcerers' cognition* allowed don Juan and all the shamans of his lineage to arrive at odd energetic conclusions which at first sight appear to be pertinent only to them and their personal circumstances, but which, if they are examined with care, may be applicable to any one of us. According to don Juan, the culmination of the shamans' quest is something he considered to be the ultimate*energetic fact*, not only for sorcerers, but for every human being on Earth. He called it the *definitive journey*.

The*definitive journey* is the possibility that individual awareness, enhanced to the limit by the individual's adherence to the *shamans' cognition*, could be maintained beyond the point at which the organism is capable of functioning as a cohesive unit, that is to say, beyond death. This transcendental awareness was understood by the shamans of ancient Mexico as the possibility for the awareness of human beings to go beyond everything that is known, and arrive, in this manner, at the level of energy that flows in the universe. Shamans like don Juan Matus defined

their quest as the quest of becoming, in the end, an *inorganic being*, meaning energy aware of itself, acting as a cohesive unit, but without an organism. They called this aspect of their cognition *total freedom*, a state in which awareness exists, free from the impositions of socialization and syntax.

These are the general conclusions that have been drawn from my immersion in the *cognition* of the shamans of ancient Mexico. Years after the publication of *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, I realized that what don Juan Matus had offered me was a total cognitive revolution. I have tried, in my subsequent works, to give an idea of the procedures to effectuate this cognitive revolution. In view of the fact that don Juan was acquainting me with a live world, the processes of change in such a live world never cease. Conclusions, therefore, are only mnemonic devices, or operational structures, which serve the function of springboards into new horizons of *cognition*